

The White Prince

They said I could take him out in his wheelchair every Sunday so long as I didn't tire him, so long as he was back by supper. As Bertie said, it was just like our Sundays had been when we were little. There was only one place we could go to, a small village only a mile away. There wasn't much left of the village, a few streets of battered houses, a church with its steeple broken off halfway up, and a café in the square, thankfully still intact. I would push him in his chair some of the way and he would hobble along with his stick when he felt strong enough. Mostly we would sit in the café and talk,

or walk along the river and talk. We had so many years to catch up on.

He hadn't written, he told me, because he'd thought that each day at the front might be his last, that he might be dead by sunset. So many of his friends were dead. Sooner or later, it had to be his turn. He wanted me to forget him, so that I wouldn't know when he was killed, so that I wouldn't be hurt. What you don't know, you don't grieve over, he said. He had never imagined that he would survive, that he would ever see me again.

It was on one of our Sunday outings that I noticed the poster across the street on the wall of what was left of the post office. The colours were faded and the bottom half had been torn away, but at the top the print was quite clear. It was in French. *Cirque Merlot*, it read, and underneath: *Le Prince Blanc* – The White

Prince! And just discernible, a picture of a lion roaring, a white lion. Bertie had seen it too.

"It's him!" he breathed. "It has to be him!" With no help from me, he was out of his wheelchair, stick in hand, limping across the street towards the café.

The café owner was wiping down the tables outside on the pavement. "The circus," Bertie began, pointing back at the poster. He didn't speak much French, so he shouted in English instead. "You know, lions, elephants, clowns!"

The man looked at him blankly and shrugged. So Bertie started roaring like a lion and clawing the air. I could see alarmed faces at the window of the café, and the man was backing away shaking his head. I ripped the poster off the wall and brought it over. My French was a little better than Bertie's. The café owner understood at once.

"Ah," he said, smiling with relief. "Monsieur Merlot. *Le cirque. C'est triste, très triste.*" And he went on in broken English: "The circus. He is finished. Sad, very sad. The soldiers, you understand, they want beer and wine, and girls maybe.



They do not want the circus. No one comes, and so Monsieur Merlot, he have to close the circus. But what can he do with all the animals? He keep them. He feed them.

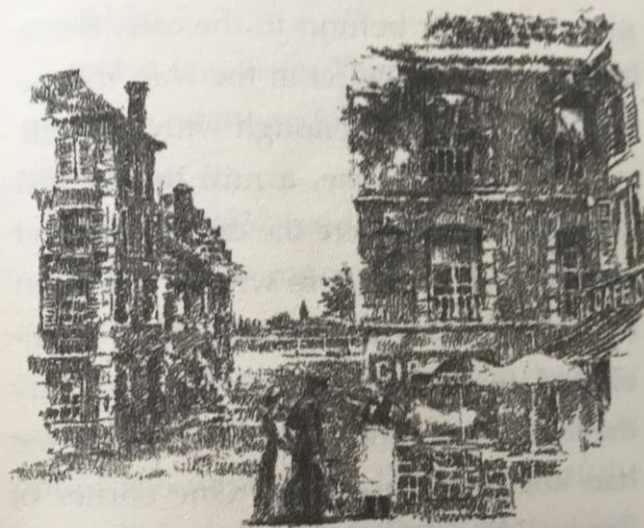
But the shells come, more and more they come, and his house – how you say it? – it is bombarded. Many animals are dead. But Monsieur Merlot, he stay. He keep only the elephants, the monkeys, and the lion, 'The White Prince'. Everyone love The White Prince. The army, they take all the hay for the horses. There is no food for the animals. So Monsieur Merlot, he take his gun and he have to shoot them. No more circus. Finish. *Triste, très triste.*"

"All of them?" cried Bertie. "He shot all of them?"

"No," said the man. "Not all. He keep The White Prince. He could not shoot The White Prince, never. Monsieur Merlot, he bring him from Africa many years ago. Most famous lion in all of France. He love the lion like a son. That lion, he make Monsieur Merlot a rich man. But he is not rich no more. He lose everything. Now he have nothing, just The White

Prince. It is true. I think they die together. Maybe they die already. Who knows?"

"This Monsieur Merlot," Bertie said, "where does he live? Where can I find him?"



The man pointed out of the village. "Seven, maybe eight kilometres," he said. "It is an old house by the river. Over the bridge and on the left. Not too far. But maybe Monsieur Merlot he is not there no more. Maybe the house is not there

no more. Who knows?" And with a last shrug he turned and went indoors.

There were always army lorries rumbling through the village, so it was not at all difficult to hitch a ride. We left the wheelchair behind in the café. Bertie said it would only get in the way, that he could manage well enough with his stick. We found the house, a mill house, just over the bridge where the café owner had said it would be. There wasn't much left of it. The barns all around were shell-blasted, the ruins blackened by fire. Only the main house still had a roof, but it too had not gone unscathed. One corner of the building had been holed and was partially covered by canvas that flapped in the wind. There was no sign of life.

Bertie knocked on the door several times, but there was no answer. The place frightened me. I wanted to leave at once, but Bertie would not hear of it. When

he pushed gently at the door, it opened. Everything was dark inside. I did not want to go in, but Bertie took me firmly by the hand.

"He's in here," he whispered. "I can smell him."

And it was true. There was a smell in the air, pungent and rank, and to me quite unfamiliar.

"*Qui est là?*" said a voice from the darkness of the room. "*Qu'est-ce que vous voulez?*" He spoke so quietly you could hardly hear him over the rush of the river outside. I could just make out a large bed under the window at the far end of the room. A man was lying there, propped up on a pile of cushions.

"Monsieur Merlot?" Bertie asked.

"*Oui?*"

As we walked forward together, Bertie went on: "I am Bertie Andrews. Many years ago you came to my farm in Africa,

and you bought a white lion cub. Do you still have him?"

As if in answer the white blanket at the end of the bed became a lion, rose from the bed, sprang down and was padding towards us, a terrible rumble in his throat. I froze where I was as the lion came right up to us.

"It's all right, Millie. He won't hurt us," said Bertie, putting an arm round me. "We're old friends." Moaning and yowling, the lion rubbed himself up against Bertie so hard that we had to hold on to each other to stop ourselves from falling over.